ONE LARGE STEPPE FOR RUSSIAN AUTHORSHIP:

GOGOL'S TROIKA OF SETTINGS

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A

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Abstract

This exploration of Gogol's works focuses on the three major setting-related phases of his writing career: the Ukrainian beginnings, his Petersburg tales, and the provincial Russian towns that populated his final works. His choice and execution of settings is correlated to the development of a sophisticated Russian readership clamoring for a national literature, and in attempting to generate one through his works, Gogol joins the other canonical Russian authors by tackling the central problem of 19th century Russian literature: the identity and future of the Russian nation.

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Preface

The following study of Gogol was brought forth to explore, in part, some remarkable consistencies and unities in the 19th century Russian Literature canon. The historical problem of Russia's national identity emerged in the literary scene around the same time that the literary scene began dominating Russia's intellectual society. This problem came to influence the greatest works of the period's greatest authors; Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy all progress towards expressing their vision of the Russian national identity. Each author's works progress towards this ultimate thematic concern in very similar ways, and the pinnacle of their treatment of the Russian-identity-theme always takes place in the rural provincial setting. *Eugene Onegin*, *Dead Souls*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and both of Tolstoy's epics, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, allegorically depict their author's vision of the Russian national character, and all do so in the provincial setting. This confluence of setting, theme, and artistic power in these several authors demanded the exploration of these factors of each individual author, Gogol being the author presently explored. "Artistic power" is a troublingly vague term, but with Gogol, his relative command of authorship can be sufficiently demonstrated in his techniques of characterization and setting, which clearly and undeniably improve with, and are linked to, each thematic jump in Gogol's career.

Gogol's progression towards his "Great Russian Novel" began with his appropriation of Ukrainian identity and narrative, a choice made consciously by the author in reaction to contemporary social conditions and literary receptiveness. Indeed,

Gogol's writings can also be used to trace the Russian readership/intelligentsia's progression during the 1830's and early 1840s. Gogol's first phase, a dedication to Ukrainian settings, was a mirror of Russian taste.

Chapter One: Little Characters in Little Russia

Before discussing Gogol's Ukrainian works directly, it would benefit us to observe the biographical and cultural forces behind Gogol's adoption of the Ukrainian folkloric setting for his early works. Gogol's writing career can be compared to a phoenix, as we will find it beginning and ending in ashes; the first ashes are those of the failed narrative poem, *Hanz Kuechelgarten*, that Gogol had brought with him to Petersburg in 1828. Intending to succeed as a poet in the thriving German Romantic tradition, Gogol instead met with indifference and scorn, a typical response from the critics of his day.[1] In response, Gogol ran around with his servant buying and burning any available copies of the poem they could find. Fortunately for all, he used the opportunity to reconsider everything about his approach to writing, and returned to the literary scene with his much more successful Dikanka tales. The poem is significant in its contributions to Gogol's early development, made possible by the poem's decided artistic insignificance.

Gogol's adoption of prose as his chief medium is the most obvious and permanent consequence of the poem's failure. More than just a practical concern of talent, Gogol's abandonment of poetry for prose was a symbolic rejection of literary standards; "literary prose" was a long way from being a respected institution among Russian readers. Along with its shift away from verse as the monolithic form of written art, Gogol encountered a culture becoming surfeited with German Romanticism. While the demand for German Romanticist stories was beginning to decline by Gogol's literary debut, the Russian

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1 Paul Debreczeny, "Nikolay Gogol and his Contemporary Critics," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 56, No. 3 (1966): 5.

reading public had, however, retained the Romantic taste for a nationality in literature[2], and at the time Gogol set about adjusting his style, writings about and from the Ukraine were in great demand. Ukraine provided the reading public of Russia with an opportunity to discover its own innate qualities and nationality, untainted by the same Westernizing reforms that had corrupted Petersburg into a copy of every Western capital. When Gogol made his narrative debut, literary critics were clamoring for a literature of the people that would represent the uniqueness of the Russian nation and reach the Russian public with a reflection of their ideal and pure characters.

The performative aspects of his narrative style, referred to as a *skaz*, ensured that the tales would be accessible to a more general public. The *skaz* is a purposeful dedication towards informality, even to the point of digression, in the telling of a story. Gogol's relatively jarring prose style is excused and diffused through the masks of narrative and storytellers; his first layer is the unofficial editor of the Dikanka tales, Rusty (Rudyi) Panko, a beekeeper. Even before *Evenings from a Village Near Dikanka* begins, the reader is presented with an epigraph from the perspective of a Petersburg gentleman reading the book, who is utterly confounded by the Ukrainian's efforts to intrude on the world of authorship. The effect divides readers into two groups: the elite gentleman, to whom the pleasures of folk tales are denied, and those willing to give Rusty a chance by sympathizing against the elite dismissal of the foreword's Petersburg Gentleman. Much of Gogol's narrative style performs this very business of defining his readership on his own

2 Anne Lounsbery, *High Art, Low Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 39.

terms, as Rusty casually addresses the reader in informal terms as a knowing, inside member of the oral-storytelling community. While Rusty himself is a storyteller, he often relates those of others, an approach which provides complicated narrative frames to most stories.

For instance, "St. John's Eve," the very first story, has an ingenious narrative frame, in which the shadow of Gogol himself appears. Bearing the heading "A True Story Told by the Beadle of the – Church," the story begins by describing how Foma Grigorievich disliked telling the same story twice, and so would always change it. Rusty describes how a city-dwelling writer,

> one of those gentlemen- its hard for us simple folk to fit a name to them: writers, no, not writers, but the same as the dealers at our fairs: they snatch, the cajole, they steal all sorts of stuff, and then bring out booklets...one of those gentlemen cajoled this same story out of Foma Grigorievich, who then forgot all about it.[3]

After getting it published, the same gentleman comes back with the copy of Foma's story, which he hands to Rusty to read. Infuriated after two pages, Foma demands proof it's his story, which Rusty shows him in the form of its printed epigraph, nearly identical to the story's original epigraph: "told by the beadle so-and-so." Foma denies ownership, and begins to tell the story again, his own way.

In this example, we see how complicated the narrative web of an oral storytelling community such as Dikanka can become. This web diffuses the otherwise jarring aspects

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3 Nikolai Gogol, *Collected Tales,* ed. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1999), 3.

of Gogol's prose, such as his interruptive digressions, by transforming potential mistakes into deliberate markers of informality and narrative perspective. We can also see the conflict between the written word and oral, traditional storytelling methods being dramatized and satirized in print. By siding with oral storytelling, Gogol allows himself greater narrative freedom to take risks and expose himself stylistically to the reading public without the risk of directly personal attribution. One of the chief benefits for Gogol of writing in his adopted Ukrainian style was to distance himself from the criticism sure to come his way from the literary establishment. While his failed poem might have expressed the romantic stirrings of a naïve young soul, vulnerable to the harsh reactions of pragmatic and reasonable readers, the yarns spun in Dikanka leave no such window to Gogol himself. Instead, they are a performance of what he perceives as Ukrainian values in a deliberately slapdash style, which ensures that all stylistic flaws could be forgiven the young, overly sensitive author. The casual, rambling style also ensured that whatever second-hand plot material was taken from European tradition, it would have a strongly rustic flavor suggestive of the Ukraine to the reading public.

"St. John's Eve," first of the Dikanka tales, begins with a classic romance plot: Pyotr Kinless is a poor, attractive suitor to the beautiful daughter of his neighbor/boss (further details of their relationship go unmentioned). Gogol spares himself the need to motivate this love: "Well, if a lad and a girl live near each other... you know yourself what comes of it."[4]Once discovered, Pyotr is banished from the household and his

4 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 7.

Pidorka's love, while her father begins to entertain thoughts of marrying her to a wealthy Polack, "all trimmed in gold, with a moustache, with a saber, with spurs, with pockets that jingled like the little bell on the bag our sacristan Taras goes around the church with every day."[5] This description is all we get of the hated fiancee trope in Gogol's romance plot, and it contains two items of interest. First, virtually every Cossack who isn't intentionally marked as poor could carry this exact description, only without the gold trim, Gogol's first and only unique detail for the Polack. Second, Gogol is only interested in this description as a vehicle for imaginative simile, which eventually becomes a cornerstone of his descriptive powers. Gogol has no real conception of this character beyond the cultural trope of Polacks, however, so the simile is somewhat disconnected from its antecedent, the pockets of the Polack, and does little to clarify his first image.

Gogol's most original element in "St. John's Eve" is the sudden genre-shift from romantic comedy to Romantic horror. An interesting consequence of this transition are the juxtaposing characterizations of the devil, who appears among the townsfolk as an unclean man known as Basavriuk. In one of several beginnings to the story, Basavriuk carouses around town with the local Cossacks and pretty girls. In the Romantic horror sections, Basavriuk has terrifying command of nature and diabolical forces. When this plot subsides, the comic ending has a slaughtered lamb growing a mustache and the face of Basavriuk. Indeed, the devil is consistently the most well-imagined character in Dikanka for Gogol, an unsurprising consequence of his personal experiences and fixation

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5 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 8.

on the devil. Inducing the shift into the horror-plot, Pyotr Kinless strikes a bargain with this devil Basavriuk to gain the fortune he needs to be a suitable match for Pidorka. Predictably, the deal goes awry when he is made to sacrifice Ivas, Pidorka's child brother, and forgets his actions afterward, a trope borrowed from the German Romanticism sweeping Russia at the time.

Once Pyotr has the money, Pidorka's father immediately agrees to a wedding, giving Gogol his first opportunity to unburden himself of his mother's folk-customs knowledge. The resulting description is, at times, less than thrilling:

> How girls in festive headdresses of yellow, blue, and pink stripes trimmed with gold braid, in fine shirts stitched with red silk and embroidered with little silver flowers, in Morocco boots with high, iron-shod heels, capered about the room as smoothly as peahens and swishing like the wind; how young women in tall headdresses, the upper part made all of gold brocade, with a small cutout behind and a golden kerchief peeking from it, with two little peaks of the finest black astrakhan, one pointing backward and the other forward, in blue jackets of the best silk with red flaps, stepped out imposingly...[6]

This passage reads more like a costume shop order than a dance. In one magnificently long sentence, Gogol packs at least three or four descriptive phrases for every action of the scene, to the point where there is decidedly no action at all. The reader is dazzled by all of the magnificent garments because that is all Gogol knows of this experience; to

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6 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 13.

have described impressions would have been fanciful and near-impossible for him. However, the elaborate description reinforces Gogol's intentionally Ukrainian performance, and so it serves the turn.

The protagonists of "St. John's Eve" are decidedly plain, and nearly identical to the protagonists of another Gogol romance plot, "The Night Before Christmas." The characters of both are mostly determined by their actions, and Gogol's material and plot maneuvers are often second-hand.[7] Hugh McLean would certainly include this story when describing Gogol's early tales: "These local-color romances seem too obviously derivative, too lacking in 'felt' experience to be regarded as revealing any basic psychological tendency on the author's part. They form a series of variations on the familiar fairy-tale pattern..." [8] Gogol's dedication to the Dikanka setting disables the wonderfully artistic point of view Gogol brings to his personal experience, the kind of imaginative detail peculiar to Gogol's vision. In the unfamiliar peasant Ukraine, Gogol is reduced to describing Oksana, the jewel of the piece, through the Dikanka lads, who "declared that there had never been, nor ever would be, a better girl in the village."[9] A less detailed description of a person would be difficult to manage; even when gloating in the mirror, she can only remark on the same dark braids that all of Gogol's Ukrainian

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7 Paul Karpuk, "Gogol's Research on Ukrainian Customs for the Dikan'ka Tales," *Russian Review* 56, no. 2 (Apr., 1997): 209-232. Karpuk's analysis of Gogol's research concerning the Dikanka tales reveals a great deal of details and plot points of "The Night Before Christmas" as taken second-hand by Gogol from his personal research sources.

8 Hugh McLean, "Gogol's Retreat from Love: Towards an Interpretation of Mirgorod," in *American Contributions to the Fourth International Congress of Slavicists*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1958) , 227.

9 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 24.

women sport.

In "The Night Before Christmas," the young Cossack Vakula (simply "the blacksmith" for the first half of the story) is in love with the incomparably beautiful Oksana, and so he visits her behind the back of her father, Choub. This time, however, the obstacle is both father and daughter; Oksana, beauty of the village, rejects Vakula with one condition: "if the blacksmith Vakula brings me the very booties the tsaritsa wears, I give my word that I'll marry him at once."[10] Depressed, Vakula thinks to hang himself, until he thinks of one possible solution: a deal with the devil.

The devil, again, has been hilariously carousing around so far in the story, hiding in a coal sack from the other suitors of Vakula's mother, Solokha. "The Night Before Christmas," however, remains a comedy, as Vakula seizes the devil's tail and forces him to submit to the sign of the cross, effectively accomplishing the bargain without the tragic consequences. Using the devil's powers, Vakula flies to Petersburg, flatters the tsaritsa, and is given her booties to return to Oksana, who has since realized she loves Vakula "[e]ven without the booties."[11] Like "St. John's Eve," "The Night Before Christmas" also ends with a brief remark about the devil, but where Basavriuk maintains a strange juxtaposition of horror and comedy, the devil in this story has remained harmless and purely comic. The ending, therefore, describes Vakula's painting of the devil in hell, which encourages the townspeople to hate and fear the devil, and say, "See what a caca's

10 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 34.
11 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 62.

painted there!"[12]

Once again, in "A Terrible Vengeance," Gogol's protagonists are a stout young Cossack, his beautiful sweetheart, and his sweetheart's antagonistic father. The insistent recurrence of conflicts between fathers and children, Gary Cox argues, reflects the dramatization of a rural lifestyle, in which family conflicts are of primary importance. He points to the significance of Pytor Kinless' name in "St. John's Eve" as indicative of the chaos of family order as cause for tragedy. The familial ties in "The Night Before Christmas" are similarly loose and conflicting, as Vakula's mother and Oksana's father are themselves engaged in relations: "my father is nobody's fool. You'll see if he doesn't marry your mother[13]," Oksana explains ironically to Vakula. At one point in the confusion of a moonless blizzard, Vakula even beats his future father-in-law out of his own home. In "A Terrible Vengeance," the ultimate cause of conflict is the murder of a sworn blood-brother and his infant son by the villainous Petro, whose inheritance is cursed to wickedness. The curse is atavistic and passes down with each generation, a curse strongly suggestive of the bonds of family ties. Such is the curse of the Sorcerer, whose daughter Ekaterina is married to Danilo, the strapping young Cossack with an infant son. Classic tragedies may reverse the comedic structure and begin with a wedding, thereby exploring the fatal risks associated with kinship; it is so in "A Terrible Vengeance" as well, which unfolds the inevitable conflict between the heathen father-in-law and the righteous Cossack Danilo, after Danilo's marriage to Ekaterina, the Sorcerer's

12 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 63.
13 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 27.

daughter.

Danilo is the epitome of the ideal Gogolian Cossack, a vocation shared by nearly all of his protagonists in Dikanka. Gogol's idea of Ukrainian performance gave them several mandates, the first of which is to boast about being Cossacks. They also swear the many oaths sworn by Cossacks, and so their behaviors become predictably inclined towards carousing and against Poles, towards armed conflict and against witches, towards dark-browed women and against their fears. As characters, their horizons are short and their ranges narrow. All they want is defined by Gogol's borrowed plot structures, and their characteristics predetermined by their Cossackhood.

However, behind this layer of cultural determinism in the Ukrainian tales, there lie the universal human qualities expressed by Gogol's characters and his narrator. While the mode of their expression may be determined by Gogol's choice of Ukrainian folk-tales, what they express about Gogol's impressions of humanity remains intact, but latent. Gogol's preoccupations, including the fantastic, the vain ambitions of men, and the comical, are apparent even in the early Ukrainian tales, and their expressions are Gogol's performance of Ukraine. The fantastic are witches, devils, and omens; the ambitions are of Cossackhood, of having a Cossack son. In any case, despite their determined patterns of expression, Gogol's main themes do arise regardless of their setting. Further, Gogol's stylistic tendency towards exaggeration is very present throughout the Dikanka tales; indeed, the device is often used to cloak his lack of real experience and description. Instead of describing what an actual beautiful Cossack woman might look like, he need

only summon the sort of hyperbolic statements and superlative comparisons Valentin Bryusov's seminal lecture "Burnt to Ashes" identifies:

> Nothing average or ordinary exists for Gogol: the boundless and the limitless are all that he knows...If it is a beautiful woman, then she is sure to be without peer. If it is courage, then it is unprecedented, superior to all other instances. If it is monstrous, then it is more monstrous than anything ever before engendered by human imagination.[14]

Although the Dikanka stories were dedicated to Ukrainian performance to a degree which hindered Gogol's ultimate artistic goals, it is also through them that he refined his techniques and style before launching into richer thematic territory.

Belonging in an intermediate group between Gogol's purely Ukrainian phase and the stride of his Petersburg fiction, Mirgorod brings with it an interesting development in Gogol's treatment and uses of setting. The long short story "Taras Bulba" represents a clear depiction of this change, as the historical novella uses the same Cossack-ideal as the Dikanka stories, but portrays them in more convincing manners, with a much more Cossack-friendly plot: a war against the Poles. Family relationships and betrayals are still at the heart of Gogol's rural Ukrainian setting, but the family of Taras, his sons Ostap and Andrei, and their mother are a more roundly characterized group than ever lived in Dikanka. The impositions of being a Cossack are also given thematic consequences in this story through the character of Andrei, whose introspective and reflective nature

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14 Valery Bryusov, "Burnt to Ashes," in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays*, ed. Robert Maguire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 105.

contrasts with the impulsive and harsh life of Cossack warriors. Andrei's internal conflict eventually explodes into open rebellion against his father and his Cossack heritage when he sides with his Polish lover during a particularly brutal Cossack siege, the cruelty of which moves him to pity.

Although the noble Polish woman is predictably flat (indeed, Gogol's women hardly ever improved from the Cossack mistresses of Dikanka), Andrei's development in characterization and internal conflict stemming from Gogol's chosen cultural setting is a large step forward. In the Dikanka tales, he had adopted the Ukrainian setting and folk-tale style without any investigation as to its influences on his characters, or the types of characters that could inhabit such a world. Instead, he repeated and imported characters from others. With "Taras Bulba," Gogol began to do in his fiction what he had formerly done in his failed career as a historian: that is, "to use his remarkable intuition to cover his actual lack of knowledge."[15] The father-son conflict is resolved violently when Taras dismounts and finishes Andrei personally, and one must wonder what psychological price Gogol's Cossacks must pay for their honors. Of course, this is the same Taras who watches in humble pride as his son Ostap is executed mercilessly as a prisoner of war by the Poles and doesn't cry out in pain.

The Cossacks of "Taras Bulba" have a thematic resonance absent in their Dikanka counterparts. They are romantic and restless wanderers, dedicated only to the present and the glory of their fellow Cossacks. They have few attachments, personal or material,

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15 Leonid Strakhovsky, "The Historianism of Gogol," *American Slavic and East European Review* 12, No. 3 (October 1953): 360.

outside of the abstract Cossack ideal of glory through combat; they spend more riches in one campaign than most Ukrainians made in a lifetime. Only Bulba's wife, perhaps Gogol's sole effective female character, expresses some grief or remorse at this cycle of violence that threatens to deprive her of husband and sons in a society that values only men. Andrei is infected with sympathy for the enemies of the Cossacks, and thereby merits swift death at the hands of his father. The tragedies that result from Taras' singleminded dedication to the Gogolian Cossack ideal cry out for a more civilized age yet to come, which Gogol eventually felt was manifested by the rise of the Russian Tsar. While only the 1842 Russianized edition makes this claim explicitly, Gogol's history lectures and patriotic ideas of the time match the conception that Taras Bulba's era was a madly romantic adolescence of the more mature Russian nation. In a lecture contemporaneous with Bulba's composition, Gogol dismisses the notion that the Crusades can be charged as a foolish endeavor, arguing that Christian Europe was too young to know any better, essentially anthropomorphizing history. While Gogol rarely reflects on the morality of their ways, he applies the same "Cossacks will be Cossacks" mentality to the carousing and marauding ways of his protagonists.

Gogol continues to use the Cossack culture in symbolic ways in "Viy," another folk-tale of the Ukraine. Beginning the tale is a description of life at a seminary school, and the divisions within their community, such as rhetoricians, philosophers, and theologians. Already Gogol has rounded out his setting with more variation than Dikanka's society had; he describes the various implications and restrictions of being in

certain of these academic divisions, and applies these mores to his characters in a convincing manner. The protagonist of our story, Philosopher Khoma Brut, has one of the first rounded psychologies of Gogol's characters, although it is primarly Gogol's own desires and impulses that fill Khoma's characterization. Most notably, Khoma has an insatiable appetite, and "had always been in the habit of packing away a ten-pound hunk of bread and some four pounds of lard before going to bed."[16]

The absurd amounts of food Khoma consumes match the absurd frequency of references to food in the tale. Everyone, not just Khoma, has a habit of eating as much as possible whenever possible, and planning their routines around acquiring food:

> All these learned folk, both seminary and boarders, while living in some sort of hereditary hostility among themselves, had extremely poor means of obtaining food and were at the same time extraordinarily voracious; so that to count how many dumplings each of them gobbled up at supper would have been a quite impossible task.[17]

Indeed, the entire plot is set into motion by Khoma and his companions seeking out a homestead from which to obtain free food. When the two other seminarians are content to spend the night in the field after becoming lost, Khoma is driven onwards by two motivations: fear of the wolves and hunger. He suggests to the group that perhaps a homestead would give them vodka, and they agree to go along; this is Khoma's first use of vodka to urge onwards an otherwise reluctant action, and it leads them directly to the

16 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 160.
17 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 157.

witch's house. While the seminarians are given no vodka after all, it is the desire for such that drives the group forward, along with Khoma's fear and appetite.

While food is abundant for Khoma Brut, women are strangely absent. He explains, "I've never had any dealings with young ladies in all my born days. Deuce take them, not to say something improper."[18] When he attempts to deny the job of reading funeral rites for the witch he has killed, Khoma downplays his holiness in a gently ironic manner: "Indecent though it is to say, I went calling on the baker's wife on Holy Thursday itself."[19] This ordinarily suggestive confession is neutralized by Khoma's character; it is clear he would visit a baker's wife for food, and nothing more. Food takes the place of Khoma's more sensual appetites; when rejecting the vaguely-frightening advances of the old woman, Khoma retorts to her, "Listen, granny...it's a fast period, and I'm the sort of man who won't break his fast even for a thousand gold roubles."[20] The poverty and insularity of the seminarian lifestyle make possible Khoma Brut's strange state of gastro-sexual affairs. Gogol brought at least some essential understanding into Khoma's social position in order to create a deeply conflicted character outside of his previous range. Khoma understands food in the way he should understand sexuality, but this dynamic is threatened when he is forced to seize control and ride on the witch's back in order to defeat her. This vaguely sexual conflict violates Khoma's repressed sensibilities, and the conflict returns to him when he is forced to read burial rites for the

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18 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 172.
19 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 174.
20 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 163.

witch's corpse, now in the form of a Cossack chief's beautiful daughter.

With the introduction of the Cossack chief and his men, a competing appetite is introduced that threatens the borders of Khoma's self-control: Vodka. When the chief's men pick up Khoma from the seminary, they stop along the way in a tavern, as is their regular habit. Khoma attempts to escape from them after seeing how drunk the Cossacks have gotten, only to find that "this escape could hardly have been accomplished, because when the philosopher decided to get up from the table, his legs turned as if to wood, and he began to see so many doors in the room that it was unlikely he could have found the real one."[21] The stereotype of the drunken, carousing Cossacks is somewhat justified thematically by the introduction of their master's household, in which a painting is engraved "Drink-- The Cossack's Delight," and "I'll Drink It All" is inscribed on the painting of a Cossack sitting on a barrel. The chief's household is one of utter licentiousness, suggesting a reason for his daughter's wicked ways. In any case, they both belong to the same forbidden territory Khoma Brut has avoided thus far. Previously, drinking has only been a merry pastime for Khoma; now, he must drink as a Cossack does, to inspire courage against the supernatural forces assaulting him in the cathedral at night.

It should be evident that Khoma cannot stand up to this challenge of his spiritual boundaries once he has been initially violated by the witch's spell in the barn. He attempts to thrive among the Cossack village, but quickly spirals out of control. He visits

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21 Gogol, *Collected Tales*, 170.

nearly everyone in the village on his third day in town, but is so drunk he is forced out of some homes for attempting to woo their women. Bravery and manhood are denied to Khoma by his station in life as a seminarian, and among the Cossacks he flounders. A thematic dichotomy is formed between the two social spheres, which are represented by separate appetites; Khoma's inability to maintain his stable identity against the forces of evil is commensurate with his inability to succeed in the Cossack lifestyle, one of freedom and prosperity, as opposed to the seminarian's indentured poverty. He only begins to fear the witch after hearing the Cossacks gathered around telling stories of her deeds, in a very deliberately oral fashion, contrasted with Khoma's bookishness: "...it's clear they don't teach you much sense there in your seminary,"[22] the Cossack Dorosh says, rebuking Khoma for not knowing of a specific man in their village. The contrasting cultures are accompanied by different forms of knowledge: the Cossacks' communal, oral knowledge, and the seminarian's bookish, exclusive knowledge. When the demons swarm him in the church, he forgets the words to his prayers; when the alternative of the full-blooded Cossack lifestyle is presented to the repressed seminarian, his appetite for food turns towards vodka. Rather than simply exploiting the cultural settings he pretends to know, Gogol begins to use them thematically to great effect (though he continues to exploit them nonetheless).

While the cultural complexity of "Viy" is absent from "Old World Landowners," the peculiar substitution of food for sensual connections is a central theme in Gogol's

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22 Gogol, *Collected Tales*, 175.

bucolic depiction of rural Ukrainian estates. The protection of our innocent, childish-elder protagonists, Afanasy Ivanovich and Pulkheria Ivanovna, from their potentially darker desires is given an effective metonym in their self-sustaining rural home, "where not one desire flies over the paling that surrounds the small yard, over the wattle fence that encloses the garden filled with apple and plum trees..."[23] Already, food is being enclosed along with desire, and the substitution is effectively the status quo of the household. R.A. Peace's analysis unpacks a great deal of this tension throughout the story: "[T]he bond between them is expressed by the offering and the accepting of food.[24]" The couple's days are almost entirely spent eating, with Afanasy Ivanovich occasionally poking a little fun at Pulkheria Ivanovna. Their essential downfall is their inability to recognize or make use of their darker impulses. The ineffectual management of the estate is evidence of this corruption, but Pulkheria and Afanasy can do little to nothing to effect change outside their static realm.

The land which they own, by great contrast, is astonishingly fertile. Despite Pulkheria's mismanagement, they are provided more than enough to sustain their lifestyle on the estate. The Ukrainian countryside in "Old World Landowners" begins to represent a more complicated symbol of fertility and purity through vital force, and Gogol has clearly thought over some of the deeper aspects of his familiar setting. The same conflict between an earthy, "sinful" sensuality and its gastronomic repression is played out in

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23 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 132.

24 R.A. Peace, "Gogol's Old World Landowners," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 53, no. 133 (October 1975): 511.

"Viy" and "Old World Landowners," a theme beautifully touched upon by the flies surrounding the couples' estate and swarming their food. The primal elements are represented by the forest surrounding the estate, and its natural abundance of food. Pulkheria is unable to prevent her incompetent steward from clearing down lots of her timber. Her death comes to her in the form of an omen from the forest, when her housecat is seduced by the wild tomcats of the forest "as a troop of soldiers lures away a foolish peasant girl."[25] The comparison is particularly significant because it hearkens back to Afanasy's long forgotten days of soldiering, "when he was a fine fellow and wore an embroidered uniform; he had even abducted Pulkheria Ivanovna rather adroitly when her relations refused to give her to him; but of that, too, he remembered very little, or at least never spoke."[26] So, in the reflection of her own youthful vitality, Pulkheria interprets the end of her static life on the homestead, and her imminent demise.[27]

The disruption of this calm, static lifestyle also drives the plot of the final Mirgorod tale, "The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled With Ivan Nikiforovich." Just as no desires fly over the fences of Afanasy and Pulkheria, the conflict of this tale is caused when Ivan Ivanovich begins reflecting on his own property: "'What haven't I got?' Having asked himself such a profound question, Ivan Ivanovich fell to thinking; and meanwhile his eyes sought new objects, stepped over the fence into Ivan Nikiforovich's

25 Gogol, *Collected Tales*, 146.
26 Gogol, *Collected Tales*, 135.
27 A good deal of this analysis is indebted to R.A. Peace's interpretation of the story.

yard, and involuntarily became occupied with a curious spectacle."[28] When his desires transcend the prosperity of his yard, he sees the gun of Ivan Nikiforovich, for which he insists on bartering. Previously content with, even preening over, his "[f]owl, outbuildings, barns, what not else; vodka of various flavors; pears and plums in the orchards; poppies cabbage, and peas in the garden,"[29] Ivan Ivanovich wants something more than the sleepy Mirgorod existence can afford him, and finds it in the completely inappropriate military uniform being hung out to dry by Ivan Nikiforovich.

The presence of such a military outfit in Ivan Nikiforovich's yard is absurd; it belongs to an entirely different style of life from the rural Ukrainian estate-owner's. Ivan Ivanovich intends to bargain on this very position: "God help you, Ivan Nikiforovich, when are you going to shoot? Maybe after the Second Coming. As far as I know or anyone else remembers, you've never shot so much as a single duck."[30] The world of rifles and uniforms is well beyond them, as are the affairs of the world at large; after the first negotiation for the gun breaks down, they idly chat about three kings declaring war on the tsar in order to force Russians to embrace the Turkish faith. All the same, Ivan Ivanovich's desire for the gun forces a quarrel when Ivan Nikiforovich refuses to trade the weapon, instead trading insults until Ivan Ivanovich is called a goose: "If Ivan Nikiforivich hadn't said this word, they would have had an argument and parted friends

28 Gogol, *Collected Tales*, 199.
29 Gogol, *Collected Tales*, 199.
30 Gogol, *Collected Tales*, 204.

as usual but now something quite different happened. Ivan Ivanovich got all fired up."[31] The vilest insult imaginable to the quaintly rural Ivans is directly attached to their farming lifestyles, and the ridiculousness of quarreling over a gun with terms such as "goose" and "Go kiss your sow!" plays up the contrast between the insular Ukraine and the violent, outer reality to which the gun originally belongs.

While Gogol retains the rural Ukrainian setting from the early Dikanka tales for all of Mirgorod, it is a more richly filled out version. Though Gogol still borrows the basic plot for the story of the two Ivans, his thematic vision of the Ukrainian experience, contrasted with the modernity of Russia, lends his version an originality and superiority as compared to his original source. Throughout the tales of Mirgorod, the idyllic Ukraine Gogol exploits for his first stories becomes threatened by all sorts of intrusions and thematic counterpoints. Further, the use of this setting is no longer an excuse for a drastic performative slant or narrative shiftiness. Gogol speaks of the same setting with a more restrained and authoritative narrative tone, while still shuffling in the digressive asides and direct addresses with which Rusty Panko charmed his resistant gentlemanly readers. "Old World Landowners" is told from the perspective of a mainstream Russian looking back fondly on the Ukrainian farmlands, and nostalgia for a Ukrainian folk-experience pervades most of the Mirgorod Tales. Thematically, Gogol had already departed from the primitive Ukrainian stereotypes that had launched his literary career, and he would soon depart from its use as a setting altogether.

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31 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 206.

Chapter Two: The Bureaucrat Race of Gogol's Petersburg Tales

Around the same time as the composition of Mirgorod, Gogol had begun to process his Petersburg experience into his most imaginative fiction yet, released in the short story collection Arabesques in 1835. Just as in Mirgorod, he manipulated the cultural baggage of his chosen setting for direct narrative effects; but unlike the

nostalgiac Ukrainian collection, the Petersburg tales of Arabesques, "The Portrait," "Nevsky Prospect," and "Diary of a Madman," are informed by the direct reality of Gogol's contemporary experience. Ideologically preceding these stories are the essays of Arabesques, which define Gogol's theories of art, his correspondences concerning his Petersburg experience, and the maturing development of his relationship with the Russian reading public.

Gogol's impressions of the capital by this time exhibit a strong competition between strangeness and grandeur. There was something grand in its strangeness for Gogol, and something strange in its greatness. Nabokov's biography of the author emphasizes Gogol's part in imaginatively exaggerating the capital: "No wonder St. Petersburg revealed its oddity when the oddest Russian in Russia walked its streets."[32] At this point in his literary career, Gogol was established enough to abandon the gimmick of Ukrainian performance in order to garner an audience. With the audience present, Gogol could begin to write from his own experiences in Petersburg, which exaggerated the characteristics of real people rather than folk-shadows. However, just as in Mirgorod when he began displacing his own quirks onto most of his characters, the civil servants and noblemen populating the Petersburg tales share the same sense of terrible awe Gogol sensed in the capital.

In Arabesques, Gogol's theories concerning art mostly amount to a series of violent metaphors for sublimity. He stresses that buildings should be so magnificent as to

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32 Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: J. Laughlin, 1961), 12.

knock the wind out of the viewers, and stun them in awe of their relative insignificance. This form of magnificence does not sound like a pleasant aesthetic experience; rather, it is a formulation of Gogol's first reactions to the capital and its intimidating social surroundings. After spending some down and out years in gloomy Petersburg, Gogol developed an aesthetic manifesto based on the suppressive misery of the city's imposing edifices. He argues that this imposing style is how history teachers--such as himself--should command their classrooms: by stunning them into submission and acceptance of knowledge, entirely dominating their attention. This idea pervades the Petersburg experience for Gogol in Arabesques and provides the denouement for his tale "The Portrait."

At times, "The Portrait" reads more like an extension of Gogol's discussion of art than an engaging short story. The story begins with an amusing scene at an art shop in Petersburg, where "one could only see dull-witted, impotent, decrepit giftlessness arbitrarily placing itself among the arts, when it belonged among the lowest crafts," and the shop owner treats art as any other commodity, resulting in some delightfully inept pitches: "What painterliness! It simply hits you in the eye. We just got them from the exchange; the varnish is still wet."[33] Here, Gogol portrays the ineptitude of aesthetic appreciation among the general Russian public, a naivety he believes belonged also to the literary community. In his article discussing literary criticism, Gogol wavers between the options of slow, dedicated reform of ideas through steady improvement and critiques of

33 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 341; 342.

current trends, or a sudden, aesthetic knock-out blow of such majesty that it would humble the uncomprehending public into comprehension. While the article advocated the institutions of critics and journals being used to connect readers and writers,

> To the artist in 'The Portrait,' the audience represents not a potential interlocutor nor even a pedagogical target, but a barrier to be overcome. This barrier is breached and the ideal audience created only when a work of genius smashes through the resistance of the contentious crowd. A work of art must, in a sense, ambush an unsuspecting audience...[34]

In "The Portrait," Gogol allegorically displays the aesthetic tour-de-force he eventually believed he was destined to provide to the world of literature.

In the somewhat predictable arc of the story, the artist Chertkov buys a haunted portrait at the art shop and finds a fortune's worth of gold rubles inside. Having acquired the taste for wealth, Chertkov begins to corrupt his artistic vision for the sake of widespread fame and success, eventually losing his artistic taste after catering too much to the every whim of his public patrons. The public is again displayed as a corrupting force to the pure artist in Russian society; following the demands of his portrait subjects causes Chertkov to continue his descent away from true art. This position is not surprising from Gogol, whose oversensitivity to public criticism had already caused him to flee the country in 1829, and would cause him to flee again after the debut of Inspector General in 1836. Gogol readily blames the ignorance of his readership and critics for any

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34 Lounsbery, *High Art, Low Culture*, 76.

perceived failures of his own, and while the readership before Gogol was indeed somewhat lacking in taste and appreciation for Gogol's standards, Gogol himself was far from perfect during his formative years. Rather than slowly deal with them through discourse, Gogol hoped to bypass his society's ignorance through the sheer genius of his art, a desire played out by the resolution to "The Portrait."

After all traces of Chertkov's talent have disintegrated, one of his fellow art students from long ago returns from his almost pilgrim-like sabbatical in Rome. At the unveiling of the painting, Chertkov is ready to speak ill about the painter, as he does about all new art, in order to retain his elite status in the community. The glitz and glamor of the Petersburg crowd have entirely corrupted poor Chertkov, while the mystical properties of Rome have provided his competitor the ideal aesthetic training, which reads like a list of Gogol justifying himself to the public:

> He was not concerned if people commented on his character, his inability to deal with people, his nonobservance of worldly proprieties, the humiliation he inflicted upon the estate of artists by his poor, unfashionable dress. He could not have cared less whether his brethren were angry with him or not. He disregarded everything, he gave everything to art.[35]

Indeed, this is the artist Gogol ardently wished himself to be, the ideal he romantically hoped to achieve. However, he could never truly distance himself from the reading public's response to his work, and his concern for its opinions is evident in his overly-

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35 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 369.

forceful denial of its aesthetic abilities and appreciation. There is something of Gogol in both artists at the end of the story, Chertkov and his unnamed competitor. The competitor represents Gogol's ideal; when he unveils the masterpiece he has spent years working on, the public is stunned into acknowledgment of his universal genius. Chertkov is more reflective of the realities of Gogol's previous failures and inner turmoil, as he madly questions whether he ever had talent at all after seeing his competitor's painting. Gogol-like, Chertkov rushes out to burn whatever art he can afford to purchase, out of jealousy for the artists' talent. Fortunately, Gogol only stuck to burning his own works in response to painful recognition of his failures.

In "The Portrait," Gogol tackles the subject of Petersburg's artistic community and struggles to determine his own place within that community. While some of Chertkov's overdramatic fate reflects Gogol's own exaggerated psychology, the rest of the community is portrayed as an almost ideal artistic public: that is, one willing to be knocked into aesthetic submission by an occasional work of obvious genius. The reality of his artistic public frustrated Gogol greatly, and he takes it out on Petersburg in this story, portraying the city as a breeding ground for artistic ignorance, derivativeness, and corruption. The true corrupting influence of the story, however, is the haunted portrait, a supernatural result of one man's boundless cruelty faithfully portrayed on canvas. This is something like Petersburg itself to Gogol, who inherited Pushkin's vision of Petersburg from The Bronze Horseman and amplified it through his imagination. Although the story itself makes no such connection, or such a direct attack on the city itself, Gogol hated the

city for its copying of other cities and its lack of originality or genuine "Russian" expression. This is the mediocrity to blame for Chertkov's slide away from art and the public's general ignorance: the lack of originality in the Petersburg lifestyle.

The same use of the supernatural, exaggerated unreality of Petersburg life darkens the tragic tones of "Nevsky Prospect," and Gogol's portrayal of its social ladder provides plenty of material for its comic subplot. While "The Portrait" addresses the corrupting flattery of Petersburg's art community, it can hardly compare to the deceptiveness of the capital in "Nevsky Prospect." Again, both sides of the experience are given a character, with the lowly artist Piskarev, crushed under the capital's strange beauty, and the boldly overconfident Lieutenant Pirogov, whose bravado and self-confidence are endemic to the Petersburg way of life. Piskarev is an over-romantic dreamer, and as such, particularly vulnerable to the darker sides of Petersburg. His disposition seems entirely unsuitable and out of place for the capital; he is a man who "belongs as much to the citizens of Petersburg as a person who comes to us in a dream belongs to the real world."[36] His first glimpses of the beautiful woman he pursues represent the city's chaotic influence and the uncertainty of reality in such a place; "[I]t seems to him that a slight smile flashed on her lips. He trembled all over and did not believe his eyes. No, it was the street lamp with its deceitful light showing the semblance of a smile on her face; no, it was his own dreams laughing at him."[37] For Piskarev's inner conflict is reflected in the capital's strange atmosphere, just as Gogol's feelings of

36 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 252.
37 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 254.

submission and grandeur found reflection in the capital's architecture. Here Gogol continues to develop his technique of reflecting a character through his or her surroundings, but he has also gone one step further than before in the relationship between his setting and his characters; the city becomes an active force of subversion and deceit for Piskarev and exists as its own towering entity over its residents. This active influence of the capital on Gogol's characters introduces perhaps the only creative restriction of this period's works; every character in Petersburg is to some degree dominated by the social impositions of life. Indeed, for some of Gogol's simpler characters (mostly, of course, his women characters) the culture of the capital totally defines both personality and function.

Piskarev's blonde beauty is more or less a representation of Petersburg society rather than an individual character. When Piskarev goes to her flat, he is mostly horrified by her surroundings:

> The rather nice furniture was covered with dust: a spider had its web over a molded cornice; in the half-open doorway to another room, a spurred boot gleamed and the red piping of a uniform flitted: a loud male voice and female laughter ran out unrestrainedly.
>
> God, where had he come! [38]

The woman's surroundings are used metonymically to represent her deceptive and corrupted beauty. In the narrator's digression on her ruined potential, he eulogizes the

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38 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 255.

possible settings in which she could have flourished, and pities her fate for having fallen into the corrupt society of Petersburg, that "by the terrible will of some infernal spirit who wishes to destroy the harmony of life, she had been flung, with a loud laugh, into the abyss."[39] It is clear that Petersburg, not the woman, is to blame, and in something of a frighteningly demonic fashion.

Even in the purely comic narrative of Lieutenant Pirogov and his German blonde, the characters are determined mostly by stereotypes and surroundings. In order to describe Pirogov, Gogol's narrator enters into a long description "about the society to which Pirogov belonged. There are officers in Petersburg who constitute a sort of middle class in society." He continues to list the traits of Pirogov's society, until he finally reaches a point where it seems there is nothing left to be said about Pirogov. At this point, after describing the very beards of the future relations of Pirogov's sort, the narrator announces Pirogov's unique talents, which amount to trifles: "He could very pleasantly tell a joke about a cannon being one thing and a unicorn something else again. However, it is rather difficult to enumerate all the talents fate had bestowed on Pirogov."[40] Indeed, it is rather difficult to enumerate what barely exists.

Nevertheless, Pirogov has a boundless self-confidence in his abilities with women, and with him Gogol begins to experiment with the boasting, hollow character type he would later perfect in *The Inspector General's* protagonist, Khlestakov. Pirogov has few character traits, but proceeds to build upon them anyway; the distinction between

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39 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 257.
40 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 268.

his self-conception and the reader's conception is used to hilarious effect. Rather than ignoring a lack of characterization, Gogol begins to exploit this weakness as rich thematic territory, when Pirogov's vanity is pierced by the stalwart pragmatism of his German woman.

The object of Pirogov's affection has even less of a character, only referred to as "the German lady."[41] The motivations and characteristics of Schiller and his wife are almost exclusively defined by being Germans: "Schiller was a perfect German in the full sense of the word."[42] His wife dances "because German women are always eager to dance," and Pirogov starts slowly, "knowing that German women need gradualness."[43] When Schiller bursts in on his wife and Pirogov dancing, his rant ends up focusing on his Germanhood: "I have lived in Petersburg for eight years, I have my mother in Swabia and my uncle in Nuremberg; I am a German, not a horned beef!"[44]In short, neither character does anything to deviate from Gogol's stereotype of the Petersburg German, and Schiller boasts of his Germanhood almost as loudly as Gogol's Cossacks boast of their Cossackhood.

Despite its limiting use of stereotypes and shallow characters, "Nevsky Prospect" is a huge leap forward for Gogol in his artistic use of setting. The two narratives are bound by nothing except their beginnings on Nevsky Prospect and their thematic ties to the city; while Pirogov and Piskarev begin the story by talking with each other, they

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41 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 272.
42 Gogol, *Collected Tales*. 274.
43 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 275.
44 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 276

quickly part ways after their respective women and never see each other again. Pirogov does not even attend Piskarev's funeral. The narratives are, rather, combined by their exploration of Nevsky Prospect as an entity, and its influences on the artistic imagination. Piskarev's romanticism is frustrated by the capital's plainness, but inflamed by its false and corrupted beauty. Pirogov's brazen self-confidence allows him to accept every setback with equanimity, and his position in society assures him a measure of pride while sparing him the need for self-reflection. The vain, outward looking nature of Petersburg never allows Pirogov to notice his utter plainness, the middling sort of nature shared by Gogol's greatest protagonists, such as Poprischin in "The Diary of a Madman."

Although he shares the same lack of inner life as Lieutenant, Poprischin does not have the blessing of the lieutenant's rank, and he never will. His utter failure to make anything of himself forces Poprishin to realize an inner lack which Pirogov blissfully overlooks. The outward ranking of Gogol's protagonist condemns him inwardly; he is the first of the "eternal titular councillor" characters which populate Gogol's Petersburg, one who sharpens pencils for bureaucrats all day. His problems are defined by his station in life, as he cannot win the director's daughter due to his impoverished rank. His section chief admonishes him for the ambition: "Do you think I don't know all your pranks? You're dangling after the director's daughter! Well, take a look at yourself, only think, what are you? You're a zero, nothing more. You haven't got a kopeck to your name."[45] The rebuke inspires Poprischin's fatal self-reflective path to madness.

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45 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 283.

He begins to doubt his station in life, but also to doubt the qualities behind others' places as well, and thereby doubts the system in general. He describes the director in his office with a recriminating sort of awe: "Oh, what a head that must be! Quite silent, but in his head, I think, he ponders everything. I wish I knew what he thinks about most; what's cooking in that head? I'd like to have a closer look at these gentlemen's lives, at all these equivocations and courtly tricks..."[46] Immediately after wondering this, Poprischin suddenly recalls the conversation he overheard of two dogs on Nevsky Prospect, and the exponential decline of Poprischin's sanity begins. He imagines complicated conversations conducted by the director's dog, and continued through a correspondence of letters that Poprischin has obtained. The dogs' letters reinforce Poprischin's notion that his love for Sophia is hopeless due to his rank, and he begins to realize the injustice of the Petersburg bureaucracy, the system which has provided him with meaning and ambition all his life.

> All that's best in the world, all of it goes either to kammerjunkers or generals. You find a poor treasure for yourself, hope to reach out your hand to it—a kammerjunker or a general plucks it away from you. Devil take it! I wish I could become a general myself: not so as to get her hand and the rest of it, no, I want to be a general simply to see how they'll fawn and perform all those various courtly tricks and equivocations, and then to tell them I spit on them both.[47]

At this point, he begins to entertain the idea of being something other than a titular councillor, and questions why he is destined to be precisely a titular councillor. The

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46 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 285.
47 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 292.

extremity of Poprischin's self-doubt matches the doubts he has of the Petersburg system, and in his madness he rejects them both and declares himself King of Spain. The complexity of Poprischin's need for and loathing of the bureaucratic system creates one of Gogol's most compelling protagonists yet. This relationship between Petersburg and its civil servants is explored further in his final short stories, but "Diary of a Madman" marks the first full use of Petersburg society as an antagonistic force, against which the existential yearnings of Gogol's middlemen are cast.

"The Nose" and "The Overcoat" continue to flesh out Gogol's complicated symbolic thesis for the capital, and while the settings are more thematically rich and grounded in experience than the Ukrainian tales formerly were, the characters' lives and personalities are inextricably bound to life in the capital. Gogol's characters would not, could not exist without Petersburg culture, and Gogol's exaggerated idea of the capital city informs every aspect of these tales.

"The Nose" begins with the barber Ivan Yakovlevich, who is at first a relative outsider to the civil service hustle and bustle: "[H]is family name has been lost, and even on his signboard...nothing more appears."[48] In Gogol's Petersburg, these signboards are very important; their ostentatious presentations were multiplied by Gogol's imagination and represented part of the parade of self-image that Gogol associated with Petersburg. As Nabokov notes, "The shop signs in the St. Petersburg of the late twenties were painted and multiplied by Gogol himself in his letters in order to convey...the symbolic meaning

48 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 301.

of the "capital."[49] However, just because Yakovlevich lags behind in the Petersburg rat race does not mean he is immune to its effects. On the contrary, his position is all the more vulnerable; the terrifying thought of the police appears to Ivan through their uniforms: "He could already picture the scarlet collar, beautifully embroidered with silver, the sword...and he trembled all over."[50]

As in the Ukrainian tales, Gogol digresses to exaggerated descriptive lengths, proceeding even to the embroidery of the officer's uniform; however, the effect is more psychologically true and engaging than his previous over-detailing. The contrast between his use of the same detail is striking; in the Ukrainian tales, the officer's description would be a tedious list, delivered as an interruptive digression from the main action and detracting of the story's narrative flow. Here Ivan's over-detailed imagination when thinking of the police resorts to a psychological displacement of the officer's frightening effect onto his uniform, his sword, the collar. The symbolic connection returns to the source of all symbols: Petersburg society. It is not a stretch to connect the uniform with the system that endows the uniform with meaning, and makes the specifically silver and scarlet collar so dreadful. Indeed, Gogol's idea of the Petersburg system is the font and source of most symbolic meaning throughout the Petersburg tales.

From his very first introduction, our protagonist Kovalev is defined by his place in the ranks; "The collegiate assessor Kovalev woke up quite early..."[51] In Gogol's

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49 Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol,* 10.
50 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 303.
51 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 304.

Petersburg, rank always comes first of all. Just as happens to Chertkov in the "The Portrait," the vanity of those swept up in Petersburg society can be cured with a healthy dose of supernatural intervention, and when Kovalev's nose disappears from his face, he is forced into the introspection lethal to Gogol's bureaucrats. Kovalev's superfluousness in the Petersburg system finds expression in the revelation of how superfluous Kovalev's nose has been all along; the doctor's comic refusal to attach it carries a great deal of resonance: "No, impossible. You'd better stay the way you are, because it might come out still worse. Of course, it could be attached; I could perhaps attach it for you now; but I assure you it will be the worse for you."[52] In his own way, the doctor understands Kovalev's engagement in the vanity of ranks and appearances as a tragic flaw and hopes to help him away from it. The doctor sequence is something like a comic inversion of the Doctor figure in morality plays, who always comes around to advise the poor sinner of the true path to righteousness. Kovalev, of course, can have no idea of the significance of the doctor's advice; he will never become self-aware of the ridiculous system in which he is engaged, not even after his own nose appears in a cathedral dressed as a superior officer.

The reality-warping power of the Petersburg social system is demonstrated in full force during the cathedral confrontation in "The Nose." When Kovalev recognizes his own nose in a superior officer's uniform, he is torn between the evidence of reality itself and the influences of the ranking system. Despite the situation, he is still intimidated: "By

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52 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 319.

all tokens, by his uniform, by his hat, one can see he's a state councillor. Devil knows how to go about it!"[53] The tokens of the Petersburg system mean more to Kovalev than the absurdity of his runaway nose, and his meek demands are rebuked through a reassertion of this hegemonic order when the nose answers, "You are mistaken, my dear sir. I am by myself. Besides, there can be no close relationship between us. Judging by the buttons on your uniform, you must serve in a different department."[54] Again the uniforms, symbolic of the Petersburg order, mean more than the relationship between a man and his own nose.

With his nose gone, Kovalev loses the self-confidence which gives him self-satisfaction and meaning in the social system. His rank of major means nothing without the nose. The standards of decency and propriety, which elevated him to such heights as courting a state councillor's daughter, now restrict him in the search for his nose. The newspaper refuses to print his ad requesting the return of his nose, with a hilariously ironic addition that

> there was a similar incident last week. A clerk came, just as you've come now, brought a notice, it came to two roubles seventy-three kopecks in costs, and the whole announcement was that a poodle of a black coat had run away. Nothing much there, you'd think? But it turned out to be a lampoon: this poodle was the treasurer of I forget which institution.[55]

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53 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 307.
54 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 308.
55 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 312.

This strange echo of Kovalev's situation, demanding the return of a higher-ranking officer who is really something entirely different, reinforces the absurdity and pervasiveness of the system and demonstrates the newspaper's unwillingness to violate that order, even to the point of denying reality.

In the end, Kovalev's nose and self-confidence are restored, and he blissfully returns to enjoying his social station. However, Gogol has shown us the fragility and artificiality of his contentment and vanity without necessarily condemning him. Kovalev, after all, is our protagonist, and not altogether unlikeable. The obstacles he has to overcome are a result of his being caught in the Petersburg system, but besides perpetuating that system himself, Kovalev is not really guilty of much. His problems are portrayed comically and their effects remain largely harmless; Gogol takes much delight in this petty self-satisfaction regardless of any eventual moral condemnation of it.

During Gogol's Petersburg phase, human ambition is channeled into two different forms by the bureaucratic system: comic exploitation of one's rank, or tragic deploring of one's rank. Sometimes, as in "Diary of a Madman," both can happen simultaneously, as when Poprischin pathetically retorts that his rank makes him a nobleman as much as any general. The natural human impulse towards self-aggrandizement is exaggerated and warped by the Petersburg civil service, either into the comic tyranny of superiors or the tragedy of the lower levels. Both his generals and his titular councillors are ambitious, but only the generals can have that drive satisfied without immense conflict; the petty ambitions of Akaky Akakevich in "The Overcoat" are given a punishment as severe as his

desires were minor. This gaudy ambition is the primary drive of all Gogol's Petersburg characters, because for Gogol, the impulse towards a false sense of importance is Petersburg's defining characteristic.

The wheels of the capital system have so ground down upon Akaky that he is forced to seek refuge in a separate, private world from the public life of officialdom. In a brilliantly satiric gesture, that private world consists of the work a petty official actually does during his time at the office: copying papers. The extreme focusing in of Akaky on this seeming insignificant aspect of civil service reveals the general distance of the bureaucracy from its actual function. When Akaky spends his life at his work, we are forced to recognize how meaningless the work itself is, and draw the conclusion that he is missing out on the seemingly essential aspects of civil service, the social benefits.

As much as it is his defining force, Petersburg is Akaky's primary antagonist as well. His position is what places him at risk in the first place: "There exists in Petersburg a powerful enemy of all who earn a salary of four hundred roubles or thereabouts. This enemy is none other than our northern frost, though, incidentally, people say it is very healthful."[56] The contrast between Akaky's reality and what 'people say' about the frost contributes nicely to Gogol's ironic deflation of Petersburg. When he acquires the new overcoat, Akaky tentatively enters the social world of Petersburg, something he has desperately avoided his entire life. The overcoat makes him noticed around the office, and he is forced into accepting an invitation to a party. The fulfillment of his brief

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56 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 399.

ambition places him among all the other Petersburg civil servants, desperate to satisfy their petty ambitions in the social order. Leaving the private world of his own to face the reality of his social station, he briefly experiences the small benefit of office-worker companionship the other lower councillors typically enjoy.

Akaky does not realize the full consequences of his new involvement in the Petersburg world of desires and ambitions, but is quickly brought to recognition after his overcoat is stolen by thieves. After briefly reveling in the potential of his happiness, Akaky is forced to see his powerlessness to retain what he has achieved. Pleading with a Very Important Person for some preference on his police case, Akaky encounters the classic Gogol office-tyrant, whose ultimate threat is simple assertion of his identity in comparison to his subordinates:

> His usual conversation with subordinates rang with strictness and consisted almost entirely of three phrases: 'How dare you? Do you know with whom you are speaking? Do you realize who is standing before you?' However, he was a kind man at heart, good to his comrades, obliging, but the rank of general had completely bewildered him.[57]

It is clear the VIP's rank has corrupted his moral sensibilities: Gogol's narrator goes on to explain that the VIP was decent among his equals, but less so among subordinates. For the Petersburg system, however, nearly everyone is subordinate to the VIP, and his ability to relate with humanity decreases relative to his ascension in the ranks. The effect his

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57 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 416.

roasting has on Akaky is lethal, as it brings into sharp relief the utter insignificance of Akaky in his newly-recognized position in Petersburg society.

For the clerks in Akaky's office, the poor titular councillor can have the opposite effect of stunning them into recognition of their true moral place among humanity. Akaky's rebuke to one of the office bullies has a remarkable effect on the young man, so that "many a time in his life he shuddered to see how much inhumanity there is in man, how much savage coarseness is concealed in refined, cultivated manners, and God! Even in a man the world regards as noble and honorable..."[58] The bureaucrats and Akaky exist in two separate worlds; while his office mates belong to the strange reality of Petersburg social society, Akaky's reality is solely founded on dedication to his station in life. The germ of Gogol's later moral theories lies here in Akaky's goodness, for it is derived from his contention with his place in life. The petty ambition, which Gogol targets in nearly all his mature work, is damaging for its attempts to change the social order and achieve a higher place than one deserves. Akaky's ordeal with the overcoat pulls him from his own reality into Petersburg, where he is soon crushed utterly by the VIP. Akaky's piteous state shocks his co-worker out of recognizing the Petersburg reality of decorum and into moral recognition of his fellow man.

"The Overcoat" was released in 1842, seven years after the composition of most of Gogol's other Petersburg stories. The complex symbolism of the capital pervading the earlier Petersburg tales is given its fullest treatment in "The Overcoat," the crowning

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58 Gogol, *Collected Tales,* 397.

achievement of Gogol's Petersburg-set tales. The strong consciousness of immorality in Petersburg society helped "The Overcoat" give Gogol his later reputation for social protest. It is the story which most directly connects the capital's bureaucracy with inhumanity, and depicts the hypocritical absence in civil servants of civility or genuine service to humanity. Gogol would incorporate the petty ambition of the Petersburg tales into his idea of the "Russian soul," but he viewed Petersburg as the quintessential society of petty ambition and its dehumanizing effects.

Chapter Three: One Large Steppe for Russia

Gogol's exploration of the Russian provincial setting, and its thematic counterpart of the universal Russian character, began in earnest with The Inspector General in 1836, contemporaneous with the height of his Petersburg phase. The provincial setting refined Gogol's previous preoccupations, found in the Dikanka and Petersburg tales, towards the development of his fullest symbolic vision of Russia's destiny and identity in *Dead Souls*. The contrast between provincialism and the capital provides almost the entire matter of The Inspector General, which can be read allegorically as an importation of the Petersburg system into the more genuine Russia found in the provinces. The conflict reveals an alarming porousness between the two supposedly distinct cultures, provides a satirical attack on Petersburg's clear dominance and exploitation of the provinces, and connects their essential shared shortcomings.

Gogol's switch of setting from the capital to the provinces, while retaining all of the Petersburg tales' symbolic baggage, also results in an explosion of complex characterization for Gogol. In The Inspector General, there are none of the previous tales'

generic civil servants or superiors, but rather, an entire host of individual characters with individual stations in the town's society. While most of the characters are government workers, and therefore still connected to the corruption of the Petersburg bureaucracy, they are more firmly defined by their roles in the provincial town than their ranks in the service- until Khlestakov arrives, of course. Rather than relying on the universal prototypes already available to his readers, Gogol instead skillfully balances the richly specific narratives and characters of his provincial community with their symbolic and functional anonymity. Nabokov's primary praise of the play is its "peculiar manner of letting 'secondary' dream characters pop out at every turn of the play (or novel, or story), to flaunt for a second their life-like existence."[59] Formerly, even Gogol's protagonists were often clichéd and hollow character-types defined by their cultural settings; by The Inspector General, however, Gogol has created a whole provincial town full of realistic and individual characters.

Gogol's technique in creating a provincial town community has several improvements over his similar performance of a Ukrainian village community. In both instances, Gogol attempts to use an exaggerated amount of detail to represent cultural authenticity. In his early writings, Gogol would formerly have stacked lists of details onto a single object, likely a Ukrainian costume or custom unfamiliar to Gogol's real experience; in the provincial settings, a perfectly placed detail or two will summon forth an entire character and move on. Nabokov's biography of Gogol carefully examines most

59 Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 42.

of the play and traces the mysterious generation of secondary characters into existence, but I will quote a section of his analysis to demonstrate the effect:

> After reading the important part of the letter referring to the impending arrival of a governmental inspector from Petersburg the Mayor automatically continues to read aloud and his mumbling engenders remarkable secondary beings that struggle to get into the front row.
>
> 'My sister Anna Kyrillovna and her husband have come to stay with us; Ivan Kyrillovich [apparently a brother, judging by the patronymic] has grown very fat and keeps playing the violin.'[60]
>
> The beauty of the thing is that these secondary characters will not appear on the stage later on.[61]

It is also classically appropriate of Nabokov's aesthetic for him to appreciate these artistic figments for their mere existence, and he delights in finding dozens more throughout the play; however, these characters are also an important contribution to the realism of Gogol's provincial setting. While the townspeople's self-images are defined by their provincialism once Khlestakov comes to town, and they are functionally reduced to more allegorical representations of Russian society, they are qualitatively expanded by Gogol's effective creation of their fictional universe. The result is an unprecedentedly engaging portrayal of Gogol's Petersburg system and its effects on Russia, represented through the provincial reaction to Khlestakov's arrival.

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60 Here, Nabokov quotes from *The Inspector General* at p. 56 of my quoted copy.
61 Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 43.

The townspeople themselves, however, are far from perfect at the beginning of the play. Every official in the town has some form of corrupt or incompetent behavior specific to his station: the Mayor is in a panic to straighten things up before the inspector's arrival, because he knows covering the town's problems will be almost impossible. He places all his confidence in appearances, and demands the first visit to the incognito, ordering his subordinates to "put [their] departments in order"[62] while he handles Khlestakov. Nearly everyone has his own department to manage according to their will, and are in disarray to correct it when Khlestakov arrives. The Mayor has already presented us in the first act with everything Khlestakov is to become in the remaining four; he relies entirely on appearances, and is willing to profit from the distance between appearances and reality, by taking bribes and conducting town business according to his most profitable motives.

What is most remarkable about Khlestakov, as with most of Gogol's Petersburg characters, is his striking inner negativity. As the postmaster later announces to the town, "He's a nobody, a nothing. The devil knows what he is."[63] He has no occupation but loafing about and scrounging for food; he has no possessions remaining except, significantly, his clothes, which he refuses to part with. "Maybe I could raise some cash on my clothes? Sell my pants? No, I'd rather starve. I've just got to show up at home in my Petersburg suit. A pity nobody would rent me a carriage. It would have been

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62 Nikolai Gogol, *Inspector General,* trans. and ed. by Milton Ehre in *The Theater of Nikolay Gogol : Plays and Selected Writings* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980), 64.

63 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 125.

marvelous, dammit, coming home in style."[64] All he cares about is having the appearance of a Petersburg dandy, to the point that he is willing to forsake himself in favor of the symbolic role the clothes confer on him. Fortunately for Khlestakov, the status of a Petersburg official is all that matters in Gogol's Russia, and he doesn't need to starve after all.

For most of the play, Khlestakov is a relatively passive character, and his behaviors only reflect the expectations provincial officials have for Petersburg inspectors. The Mayor's inherent deceptiveness causes him to project the same onto Khlestakov during their dramatically charged first confrontation. Despite Khlestakov's flat admission that he is broke and cannot pay the bill, the Mayor pursues the illusion even more strongly: "I must be bolder. He wants to remain incognito. Fine. We can bluff too, act as if we don't have a hint who he is."[65] Khlestakov's shift from passive response to the Mayor's questions to active criticism of his situation occurs when Petersburg comes up in the conversation, as he complains, "I just can't live outside of the capital. Why on earth should I waste my life among filthy peasants? Nowadays people have different needs. My soul thirsts for culture."[66] The Mayor flatteringly reciprocates this observation, and draws out the contrast by deprecating the provincial setting of his town and the rewards he receives for his services to it. Soon after, the invitation has been extended for Khlestakov to stay at the Mayor's house, and the premise is firmly set.

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64 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 71.
65 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 76.
66 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 77.

The social force of the Petersburg mythos is so strong in the provincial town that Khlestakov needs very little prompting to act out his role. Anna, the mayor's wife, most strongly enacts the difference between the provinces and the capital, in an attempt to gain some authority over her husband's provincial ways. By supplicating herself to Khlestakov and flattering him more properly than her boorish husband, Anna competes with her husband for which of the two is more worldly and knowledgeable. Khlestakov merely provides her the occasion to act out the dormant conflict between the two, as the provincial woman longing to live in Petersburg must be resentful of her contentedly provincial husband's lack of achievement. She savors their hypothetical move to Petersburg in Act V, remarking to her husband:

> Remember, we shall have to change our way of life completely. You won't be running around with a judge who kennels dogs in his parlor. Or a fool like Zemlyanika. On the contrary, your friends will be the most refined aristocrats...Only I'm apprehensive about your behavior. The shocking things you say! Words never heard in polite society.[67]

Anna's fixation with the lack of "polite society" around the provinces and the resulting fetishization of Petersburg culture allows Khlestakov to spiral out of control during their conversation in Act III. She remarks how "after the capital, traveling through the provinces must have been quite disagreeable," and he begins to ramp up his posturing: "Exceedingly so. Accustomed as I am, *comprenez-vous*, to moving in the best society,

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67 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 118.

and suddenly to find myself on the road—filthy inns, the dark gloom of ignorance..." When he remarks on her worthiness and agreeableness, she disagrees by saying, "I live in the country," allowing Khlestakov to begin his lyrically condescending and bombastic reply: "Yes, but the country also has its hillocks, its rivulets... Of course, there's no comparing it with the capital. Ah, Petersburg! That's the life. You may think I'm only a copy clerk. Not at all."[68] The flattery of Anna's Petersburg idolatry urges Khlestakov forward into his inventions of Petersburg life, which grow to such fantastic proportions that the whole town is convinced he is higher ranking than a general.

The ensuing sequence of bribery is equally staged and enacted for Khlestakov by the townspeople. The officials decide to present themselves formally to Khlestakov and offer bribes one at a time: Khlestakov only picks up on the situation after the Judge, too flustered to speak properly, drops money on the ground and denies doing so. Khlestakov is taken aback when the Judge asks if he has any special instructions for the town courts, and replies with an ironically resonant answer: "What on earth for? I have no use for the court now."[69] Indeed, with the full power of Petersburg's reputation behind his arrival in the town, Khlestakov is given free rein of everything, rendering any justice meaningless. The petitioning merchants and townspeople, in complement with the official's behavior, reveal the true corruption of the provincial system, as they register grievous complaints against the mayor in half-ironic half-tragic fashion. The whipped corporal's widow remarks on her case, "Of course, what's done is done. But make him pay me for the

68 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 87.
69 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 98.

mistake. No sense in turning my back on a piece of good luck. And besides, I can use the money."[70] By adopting the power of the state, Khlestakov has adopted the responsibilities of the state for the townspeople as well, and the result is a comically overwhelming tide of unresolved problems and deficiencies. Khlestakov, of course, can do as much as the state can in these instances, and the problems of provincial life continue under the oppression of the petty provincial officials.

While the provincial town in The Inspector General is a colorful representation of a larger Russia, the play only truly represents the setting in relation to the capital, a relationship summed up very well by Anne Lounsbery:

> In *The Inspector General* Gogol depicts provincials who have suddenly become aware that the capital has turned its eyes upon them. This awareness leaves them feeling both gratified and deeply anxious. The petty malefactors of an anonymous provincial city fear the accusatory and unmasking gaze of Petersburg, but they long for it as well--because, it seems, their manifestly insignificant lives promise to take on meaning when subjected to the capital's ordering Logos. They dream of the capital not only because of its associations with power and material rewards but also because of the capital's ability to confer *significance*.[71]

Everyone in the town has his or her own station, but it only becomes important to them once Petersburg is paying attention. Management of their own town is insignificant

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70 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 110.

71 Anne Lounsbery, "'No, This Is Not the Provinces!' Provincialism, Authenticity, and Russianness in Gogol's Day," *Russian Review* 64, no. 2 (April 2005): 268.

compared to the potential of life in Petersburg, as evidenced by Anna's outright dismissal of continuing life in the provinces after marrying Khlestakov into the family.

In a sense, *The Inspector General* serves to implicate Russia as a whole in participating in the deceits and abuses of Petersburg officialdom. During his Petersburg stories, life in the capital itself is a significant determining factor, and the setting is a surrealistic, strange atmosphere appropriate to accompany its inhumanity and artificiality. A strong element of the supernatural and the fantastic pervades the Petersburg tales, often as a contrast for the rigidity of the bureaucratic system. Realization of the capital's hollowness and vanity requires a ghost to hijack your overcoat, your nose to disappear from your face, or a portrait to drive you slowly insane. Here, there is no such element of sudden realization or catharsis, and indeed, no arguably sympathetic figures, as there were in the Petersburg tales. Even the abused townspeople complain to Khlestakov so they can be materially rewarded, and offer to bribe him just as much as the officials do.

Does Gogol hold no hope for Russia anywhere, then? Petersburg may be the locus of corruption, but its polite society has interpellated all Russian officials into its web of vain ambition to misuse power. An important factor to note, however, is that the source of all the corruption is government institutions, not the genuine nature of the people. We follow the civil servants of the town as they flatter and bribe Khlestakov into accepting their hyperbolically inadequate performances, and we only see the larger population of petitioners complaining with grievances against the Mayor. His authority is responsible for the problems in the town, and he is the most tightly engaged in the Petersburg system.

It seems the problem is Petersburg's overextension of authority into provincial matters, but the provinces themselves are eager to submit themselves to Petersburg's authority, due to their perceived inferiority to the capital.

The farther Gogol strays from Petersburg as a setting, the more the capital becomes a symbolic gesture for his favorite theme, petty ambition (imitative striving for power). While the Petersburg brand of ambition has particularly negative social consequences, Gogol is more interested in the quirks of ambition and pettiness belonging to all Russians, rather than focusing on the social implications of Petersburg's pride. At the moment of greatest opportunity for social protest in the play, when the corporal's flogged widow pleads her case against the Mayor to Khlestakov, Gogol deflates her pathos with her frank admission that she is only complaining officially because she could use the money. The townspeople's natural yearning for self-importance explodes when Khlestakov arrives as the perfect vehicle to satisfy their frustrated societal egos. They are so pleased to have a general amongst them that they never question whether he is an actual general or not, when to the impartial observer the farce is obvious. The Mayor seizes on the pretext of Khlestakov's identity because it provides him an opportunity to demonstrate his much-maligned savoir faire, and prove to his subordinates that he can act properly as an authority figure. As he boasts before going to meet the unknown traveller, "Let me handle it my way. I've been in some tight spots in my time, but things worked out. I was even thanked afterwards."[72] Even little Bobchinsky has his suit to Khlestakov

72 Gogol, *Inspector General,* 64.

to ensure that people in Petersburg know he exists. The provincials are desperate to exercise their drives towards petty pride, and they all find an outlet in Khlestakov to do so.

The provinces are an ideal place to let every Russian's petty ambition flourish in its own unique way, but *The Inspector General* mostly imports the Petersburg modes of vanity and self-satisfaction, based on the false sense of importance of officials. It is important to emphasize, however, that the townspeople choose to idolize Petersburg when, in their vast distance from the capital, they could just as easily have no concern for Petersburg. In the rustic back-country villages of anonymous Russia, the characters and concerns of Gogol are given the freedom to determine and shape their cultural setting. Although *The Inspector General* portrays these villagers while they are obsessed with the capital, once we arrive at *Dead Souls*, Petersburg has been reduced from a determining factor to an elegant metaphor for vanity and artificiality.[73] The capital itself is far from present, but its invocation by characters and the narrator imports the same absurd cycles of pride and vanity specific to Petersburg. Instead of being confined to this system of meaning, however, the spaces given to characters in *Dead Souls* are uniquely theirs; the landowners are able to shape their own spaces according to their attributes, and their estates become fully realized extensions of their characteristics.

Vladimir Golstein also focuses on the aspect of place in his analysis of the landowners of *Dead Souls*, arguing that Gogol's narrative " invites us to scrutinize the

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73 Jones, Danielle. "Multifaceted Metaphor: Gogol's Portrayal of St. Petersburg in *Dead Souls*." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 56 no. 2 (2002): 12.

way these people occupy their place, govern their estate (*pomest'e*), and thus contribute to the general order or disorder of existence."[74] The idea of having one's place in the world, and contributing therefore to its order, had begun to appeal to Gogol even in *The Inspector General*, with its emphatic inversion of order and disorder amongst the officials' relative domains. In *Dead Souls*, the concept is expanded upon and given central focus, as Gogol replaces his petty officials with Russian landowners, responsible for managing their own significant places in the world. Indeed, the novel is effectively a tour of how these landowners maintain and manage their estates, viewed through the lens of a man without a place, without very many features whatsoever.

Instead, as Donald Fanger's analysis of their relationship reveals, Chichikov moves down the road as a mirror of the landowners[75]. Fanger points to Chichikov's reciprocal conversational style as evidence of his mimicry:

> Whatever the conversation, he always knew how to keep up his end: if the talk was of horse breeding, he spoke about horse breeding; if they were speaking of fine dogs, here, too, he made very sensible observations....He spoke neither loudly nor softly, but absolutely as one ought. In short, however you turned it, he was a very respectable man.[76]

In contrast with Khlestakov, Chichikov is an active flatterer and schemer, who cultivates the art of reflecting the tastes of his present company. It would be pleasant to imagine that

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74 Golstein, Vladimir. "Landowners in Dead Souls:The Story of How Gogol Blessed What He Wanted to Curse." *The Slavic and East European Languages Journal* 41 no. 2 (Summer 1997): 244.

75 Donald Fanger, "Mirror and the Road," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33 no. 1 (June 1978): 27.

76 Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls,* Trans. and Ed. By Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. (New York: Vintage, 1997): 14.

Khlestakov, after getting the taste for conning rural townspeople and being frustrated in the service, turns up one day in the town of N. under the name Pavel Chichikov; it would also reflect Chichikov's advancement of Khlestakov's initial thematic territory.

Khlestakov is a nothing, but precisely because he is a young civil servant of no importance, as he well should be. He has no inner resources but what the townspeople thrust upon him, and he more or less stumbles blindly into his new identity as a Government Inspector. Chichikov, formerly a real government inspector in customs, also has the same inner lack as Khlestakov, but has led an eventful life full of getting nowhere. Chichikov's actual mediocrity becomes simultaneously comic and existentially tragic when he gets drunk and believes his own lies about becoming a Kherson landowner:

> Thus, on the prosecutor's droshky, he reached his inn, where for a long time still he had all sorts of nonsense on the tip of his tongue: a fair-haired bride, blushing and with a dimple on her right cheek, Kherson estates, capital. Selifan was even given some managerial orders..."[77]

Chichikov, it turns out, wants to be a landowner himself, and dreams of having his own estate to manage according to his wishes. The collection of dead souls is a step on the path towards the ideal Russian landowner our protagonist longs to become. For Gogol's blossoming goal of portraying the idealized state of the Russian people, attempting to sketch an ideal landowner character is an effective substitute for the Tsarist officials managing Russia.

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77 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 153.

Under the repressive censorship of Tsarist authorities, intellectuals of Gogol's day were forced into discussing artistic works as proxy political discussions. The process was generally to take a work of supposed realism to indirectly discuss real-life problems as though they are choices to be judged for their artistic vision rather than political merits. Applying the process to their most talented writer, the critics of Gogol's day managed to label his works as supremely realistic, in order to mine them for their social protest value. Gogol's Petersburg tales gave such critics more than enough opportunity to discuss the shortcomings of the Tsarist bureaucratic system, and *The Inspector General* secured his reputation as a scathing social critic. By the writing of *Dead Souls,*[78] Gogol had integrated this audience expectation into his own creative expectations for his work, and hoped to infuse his greatest novel with a worthy social vision of the whole of Russia: Chichikov's journey.

Chichikov's lack of strong self-identification suits Gogol's mission to portray the essential qualities of the Russian man quite well: Chichikov's allegorical *britzka* squeaks on towards the future of Russia, as he examines closely its disparate, constituting elements. Chichikov reflects the characteristics of the landowners he visits, but at the same time, so do the landowners constitute parts of Chichikov himself. His journey is one of Russia's self-discovery in the provinces, which were mysterious to the central bureaucrats in Petersburg: "In working to collect economic, agricultural, civic, meteorological, and legal data under nearly impossible conditions, these bureaucrats--like

78 Gogol's writing of *Dead Souls* was contemporaneous with the writing of his final Petersburg story, "The Overcoat"- by no coincidence the strongest "social protest" story of that phase.

Gogol-- were motivated by the belief that knowledge of provincial life was essential to helping Russia understand itself."[79] So, too, must Chichikov embark on a journey to understand himself after losing the civil service career which had defined him for so long.

The estates of the landowners are as diverse and characterized as the landowners themselves, and are present to be viewed as the concrete manifestations of their owners' characteristics. Manilov's estate, first to be visited, stood

> open to every wind that might decide to blow; the slope of the hill it stood upon was clad in mowed turf. Over it were strewn, English-fashion, two or three flower beds with bushes of lilac and yellow acacia. Five or six birches in small clumps raised their skimpy, small-leaved tops here and there.[80]

Manilov's problem is that he accepts all influences without distinction, and it shows in his estate. Because of this, Manilov becomes "neither this nor that,"[81] which seems to match Gogol's opinion of Petersburg Russians quite well: "Russians in their turn have turned into foreigners--they aren't one thing or the other."[82] What is clear is that in Manilov's portrayal, Gogol is concerned with Russia's tendency to adopt foreign influences without discrimination, losing its Russian identity in the process. In Gogol's Petersburg tales, Manilov would have been limited to a programmatic Petersburg stereotype characterization; fortunately, we are in the backwoods town of N, and Manilov is free to manifest his essential flaw in bizarre and interesting ways. Rather than learning to speak

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79 Lounsbery 268
80 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 19.
81 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 21.
82 Nikolai Gogol, *Letters of Nikolai Gogol*, ed. and trans. by Carl R. Proffer. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967): 26.

French or hiring an English tutor, Manilov names his son Themistoclus, "a strange, partly Greek name, to which, for some unknown reason, Manilov gave the ending '-us.'"[83] To affirm Manilov's connection to Petersburg, Manilov asks the boy which is Russia's best city, to which the answer is, obviously, Petersburg. The importance of the capital, however, is undercut by Manilov's previous question: which is the best city in France, a reminder that Paris comes first and foremost, and that Petersburg will always follow it. The invocation of the capital furthers Gogol's purpose by subtly advancing his criticism of Petersburg Russians through the roundly drawn character of Manilov. The deterministic Ukrainian and Petersburg settings have given way to the freedom of the landowners' estates, wherein Gogol's characters instead determine their setting.

This contrast can be illustrated by comparing the rural landowner Sobakevich with a pair of Gogol's earlier landowners, Afanasy Ivanovich and Pulkheria Ivanovna from "Old World Landowners." In both stories, the landowners live in harmony with their estates, and desire little more than their means provide. The Ukrainians, however, are more of an extension of a certain lifestyle Gogol wishes to depict as fading away, rather than active protagonists who shape their places. Their only functions are to consume what the estate produces; Pulkheria's management skills are inadequate to combat the steward's corruption, but the estate is so abundant that life continues on regardless. When her housecat returns from the forest, only to flee again, Pulkheria interprets it as the sign of her death. Afanasy is all alone in the garden when he hears a voice call his name, and

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83 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 27.

likewise interprets it as calling for his death. Everything the couple does is done for them by their fertile estate; Sobakevich, however, builds his estate as an extension of himself.

While Chichikov is driving up to the main house of Sobakevich's estate, the narrative notes the reflection of the owner's character in the estate:

> It was obvious that during its construction the architect had been in constant conflict with the owner's taste. The architect was a pedant and wanted symmetry, the owner wanted convenience...the landowner seemed greatly concerned with solidity. For the stable, sheds, and kitchens stout and hefty logs had been used, meant to stand for centuries...in short, all that he looked upon was sturdy, shakeless, in some strong and clumsy order.[84]

While clumsy, Sobakevich has a strongly felt order in his estate, crucial to the ideal Russian landowner. Indeed, Sobakevich seems to be one of the few positively portrayed landowners, and his particular petty ambition, towards management and consumption, emerges as a vibrant Russian nationalism. Sobakevich's paean to his freshly served lamb with buckwheat groat brings in invectives against Germans and French doctors while simultaneously incorporating his soul's demands into his appetite. For Gogol's ideal of a Russian spirit, Sobakevich is clearly on the right path, especially by bringing in food. Food reveals everything for Gogol, and Sobakevich is compared to Manilov by a local tavern keeper, who recollects that "Manilov was a bit more refeened than Sobakevich: he orders a chicken boiled at once, and also asks for veal; if there is lamb's liver, he also asks

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84 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 93.

for lamb's liver, and just tries a little of everything, while Sobakevich asks for some one thing, but then eats all of it..."[85] Is it any coincidence that Sobakevich is also the vastly superior manager of his own estate?

Sobakevich is infinitely more in touch with the life of his estate and villages than Manilov. Where Manilov relies on his steward to answer even Chichikov's most basic questions, and repeats his steward's every answer with authority, Sobakevich draws out a detailed list of all the peasant souls that have died since the most recent census, including their admirable qualities. When Chichikov broaches the subject of purchasing dead souls from Manilov, he shrinks from the offer and is sorely confused by it, until Chichikov tells him it would be good for the state of Russia, at which point he immediately loses all reluctance and agrees. Sobakevich, after hearing Chichikov's more delicate and refined handling of the "nonexistent souls," immediately grasps the situation and rephrases it plainly: "'You want dead souls?' Sobakevich asked quite simply, without the least surprise, as if they were talking about grain."[86] He is also the only one who recognizes Chichikov's need for the souls and understands that he is selling a commodity worth bargaining for. Sobakevich's debating infuses the dead souls with a new life as he argues over their value comparative to other dead souls: "Really, it's not so costly! Some crook would cheat you, sell you trash, not souls; but mine are all as hale as nuts, all picked men: if not craftsmen, then some other kind of sturdy muzhiks."[87]

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85 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 61.
86 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 100.
87 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 101.

Artistically, Sobakevich is a stronger character than Afanasy and Pulkheria of "Old World Landowners." Their existence is largely defined by the abundance of their estate, and, functionless, they waste their days away until the forest comes to call for them both. They are brief, ephemeral phenomena of the landscape, and live only for others to visit and enjoy their bounty. Sobakevich, however, is the closest thing to Gogol's heroic Russian landowner to grace the pages of *Dead Souls*' first volume (by the time the ideal landowner arrives on the scene in volume two, it is too late for Gogol's artistic balance of setting against thematic intent). He has strong opinions on every aspect of his estate, and some rightly negative opinions about almost everyone else in the town. While it is his habit to talk poorly about other people, Sobakevich is nevertheless the only person in the town to recognize many of the other landowners' faults. It is his castigation of Plyushkin's ruinous management that first leads Chichikov towards the miser's estate. He is constructed from the Russian impulse towards stubborn backwardness, refusing the enlightened principles of his architect in favor of what is useful, while also building everything very clumsily. Outside his estate, he acts the same way; at the feast in Chichikov's honor, he sets himself to consuming one gigantic sturgeon on his own, and can neither eat nor say anything afterwards. Sobakevich commits himself to what he wants, and regardless of the consequences or style, he achieves it.

In contrast with the sturdy Russian hero, Plyushkin stands out as a complete failure of a landowner, due to his overwhelming stinginess and lack of interest in his estate. In several ways, he is an inversion of Sobakevich's qualities; while Sobakevich

disparages the other landowners for their actual flaws, Plyushkin sees flaws in everyone and everything. Sobakevich is stingy in his negotiations with Chichikov, but more than generous in his hospitality; Plyushkin thinks of visiting as an indecent custom, and bemoans the expense of serving tea to his guests. His failure is distinctly un-Russian: "It must be said that one rarely comes upon such a phenomenon in Russia, where everything prefers rather to expand than to shrink..."[88] Plyushkin's failure is represented by his depreciated garden, where nature has overgrown to match the ruins of man-made buildings. However, the ruins are the more tragic for their scale, as the estate had once been as flourishing and profitable as Sobakevich's, until Plyushkin descended into miserliness.

Plyushkin, whose estate Chichikov visits immediately after Sobakevich's, is a cautionary tale and a foil for Sobakevich's greatness. Gogol warns that even prosperous landowners can change dramatically if they abandon their management and recluse themselves from social connections. Plyushkin drives out all of his relatives and his serfs, who run away and die at an increasing rate. "To such worthlessness, pettiness, vileness a man can descend! So changed he can become! Does this resemble the truth? Everything resembles the truth, everything can happen to a man."[89] Given their own landscapes and societies of serfs to manage, everything indeed can happen to the landowners of provincial Russia in *Dead Souls*. Gogol uses their estates as explorations of Russian characteristics, with the hopes of fulfilling the role of social prophet expected of him

88 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 120.
89 Gogol, *Dead Souls,* 128.

since his Petersburg phase.

Although the landowners are Gogol's most well-defined characters, he emphasizes that they are representative of larger, abundant character-types to be found throughout the Russian people. Gogol magnificently reverses the stereotyping of his earlier characters, in which vague generalities were all a character possessed, by turning his unique landowner characters into social types all of themselves. Gogol expected that a well-drawn representation of the Russian character would result in his readers finding such characters already existing amongst themselves, a triumph of Gogol's ability to depict the universal absurdities and drives of humanity in a grotesquely specific manner. Despite the exaggerated characteristics that make each landowner stand out among the rest, Gogol's readers still found a composite of all of Russian society formed in the provincial town of *Dead Souls*.

The unfinished novel represents the height of his exploration of the provinces, the culmination of his thematic intentions, and his most striking success in terms of combining characterization and setting. Through the completion of *Dead Souls'* first volume, Gogol's series of writings shaped a Russian readership who demanded scathing realism to denounce political ills, a tendency which would only grow more monstrously influential with time. His unwittingly bold provincial allegories excited social critics into a frenzy, and when Gogol failed to deliver on volume II, the intelligentsia was forced to direct and satisfy its own urge for social protest.

Epilogue

While our study leaves Gogol at his last completed fictional work in 1842, his ten-year decline is worth noting for contextualizing the successors to Gogol's literary crown. After the publication of *Dead Souls*, the Russian intelligentsia was enamored with the apparent arrival of the social critic they had all been lately demanding. The influential critic Belinsky hailed Gogol's novel in the spirit of nationalistic, socially-minded literature:

> All of a sudden, like a refreshing flash of lightning in the midst of oppressive and noxious suffocation and drought, there appears a purely Russian, national work of art which has arisen from the innermost recesses of the people's life, is as true as it is patriotic, and ruthlessly unveils reality, radiating a passionate, sensitive, inborn love for the fertile seeds of Russian life. It is an immeasurably artistic work,[90]

and so on. It would seem Gogol was right on track to fulfill his dream-destiny of Russia's artistic prophet; this is why it was especially important, and devastating, for him to publish *Selections from a Correspondence with Friends* in 1847, when he had failed to produce any artistic sequel to Dead Souls in five years' time.

Much to the chagrin of the leftist social-realists who championed *Dead Souls, Selections from a Correspondence with Friends* espoused ragingly conservative political views in a painfully bombastic manner. The book of collected letters exposed the intelligentsia's problem with basing ideological agreement on shared criticism of the Tsarist authorities' corruption: Gogol had never expressed any opinion as to the answer for these problems. While the liberal critics assumed he shared their proposed solutions of lessening the corrupting regime's influence, and reforming Russia into a more westernized, representational system, they were proven wrong when Gogol took the opportunity to publish his proposed book of solutions for Russia. Gogol's main focus was on glorification of Russian landowners, and their responsibilities to manage and govern

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90 Vissarion Belinsky, "Letter to Gogol," in Debreczeny, "Gogol and his Contemporary Critics," 43.

their serfs in whatever manner best served the Tsar and the Russian state. When Belinsky initially criticized the collection in publication, Gogol complained that his former champion had turned on him. In response, Belinsky wrote him a scathing letter which would circulate in literary circles for years to come, referred to simply as the "Letter to Gogol." Many members of the later Petrashevsky circle were found with the document, which became a watched document for socialist radicals in the 1840s; Dostoevsky would later describe its profound effect on the literary scene of the time. By the time Gogol finally died in 1852, the socialist intelligentsia had moved past him, and his stylistic trademarks of fantastic exaggeration and digression became anomalous among the flourishing social-realism of the time.

Though the history of Russian literature usually casts Gogol as an anomaly of some sort, whose influence on succeeding authors declined sharply, he actually fits squarely in the progression of Russian authorship in his time, and awakened/strengthened the dominating influence of generations to come: social realism. Soviets, of course, overplayed the social protest aspect of his works, and academia has downplayed the significance of these aspects in the interpretation of his work. However ill-guided the critics of his day were in declaring Gogol a supreme realist and their social champion, there is no evidence that Gogol did not himself seek this title by the very themes and problems he chose for his final works. Gogol's increasing occupation with the question of Russia's national identity places him in company with the mainstream cornerstones of the Russian literary tradition, and guaranteed his lasting influence on the generations of

writers to come.

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